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AUTHOR Deans, Tom
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ABSTRACT

There are three distinct ways that the metaphor of "clarity" is employed in rhetorical history and in daily interchanges, correlating to three ways of looking at language, in turn correlating to three approaches to teaching writing. What is being proposed is more of a taxonomy than a pedagogy, but this taxonomy is important because of its implications for teaching. There are three "motives of clarity": (1) the conventional, (2) the economical, and (3) the rhetorical. The first metaphorical understanding of "clarity" has to do with values and power, seemingly non-negotiable rules, right and wrong. Here "clarity" is associated with "correctness," with abiding by conventional rules of grammar, usage, argument and genre. The second metaphorical understanding of clarity is "economic"; it is primarily concerned with the efficiency of written communication. Here, clarity is less concerned with convention than with the cost-effective transmission of information. A lack of clarity, in this sense, is a wordiness or haphazardness or use of the figurative that demands too much time and linguistic attention of the reader. The third metaphorical understanding of "clarity" is "rhetorical," that is, it affirms real and situated readers and writers and is concerned with their capacity to "see" one another, to create meaning together through the text. Here clarity is what works to achieve the writer's purpose with a particular audience. (TB)

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Coming To Terms With Clarity

Tom Deans
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

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Clarity, as a property of text, doesn't exist. When we're talking about writing, there's no clarity *in there*. Yet we talk about "clarity" all the time as if it were. We can't seem to resist it—in teacher talk, in marginal comments on papers, in conferences with students. I hear it over and over (and ar myself saying it): "This is clear." "That isn't so clear to me." 'ould you be more lucid in this paragraph?" We find similar use the term as far back as Aristotle, who in his *Rhetoric* insists that, tyle to be good must be clear, as is proved by the fact that speech ıich fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do what a speech s to do," right up through the injunctions of today's writing ıdbooks, which ask students to, rather generally, "Be clear."

I'm intrigued by this all-pervasive use of the visual metaphor transparency for the written text, but at the same time cautious of .ng clarity as a kind of master term. Not only does it ignore the oral characteristics of writing (i.e. voice, etc.), but I've noticed that when people, especially teachers and students, use the term "clarity," they are not always talking about the same thing. And it seems to me a worthwhile project to sort through the multiple assumptions and implications embedded in how we discuss clarity in writing.

I recognize three distinct ways that the metaphor of clarity is employed in rhetorical history and in our daily interchanges, correlating to three ways of looking at language, in turn correlating to three approaches to teaching writing. I'm suggesting more of a taxonomy than a pedagogy, yet such a taxonomy has implications for how one chooses to teach. My purpose is to identify three "motives of clarity"—the *conventional*, the *economical* and the *rhetorical*—toward the end of helping teachers and students to be more specific, to get their terms more mutually understood when talking about clarity. Another goal is to get us away from *judging* a text based on some overly general notion of "clarity" and rather to explore more fitting ways to approach, understand and assess what is going on in an act of written communication. I premise my discussion on the assumption that the conventional motive, the economical motive and the rhetorical motive are all three at work in every occasion of writing, but that one is usually dominant—and it is worth discerning which one.

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The Conventional Motive

The conventional motive has to do with values and power, seemingly non-negotiable rules, right and wrong. Here clarity is associated with correctness, with abiding by conventional rules of grammar, usage, argument, genre. A lack of clarity is essentially disobedience to or departure from such rules. I originally labeled this the "moral" motive of clarity because it is faithful to dominant social mores, and deviation from such conventions (or those preferred by the teacher) is generally cast in terms of "good" and "bad" writing.

When Aristotle tells us that "naturalness is persuasive," we are to assume that what is "natural" is self-evident, not socially constructed. According to the conventional motive, writing is clear when it jibes with socially dominant definitions of "natural" and "clear." And this motive of clarity is often not limited only to privileged conventions of grammar, style, argument and genre; whether and how one's writing participates in dominant cultural knowledge will also likely be a factor in how "clear" a text will appear to a reader who is preoccupied with the conventional motive.

The invocation to "Be clear" when the conventional motive is perceived as dominant comes to mean: "Read the handbook. Above all, don't deviate from the rules of standard written English;" or, "Write in the acceptable, sanctioned way" (or in the more extreme case, "Do it *my* (the teacher's) way").

This is how some students conceive of "clarity"—doing it by the book and cleaning up the surface errors. (Although when I asked my students to define clarity, happily only about 15% attributed it to grammar and language rules, and nearly all of those students qualified their remarks, i.e., ". . . part of this [clarity] is obviously grammar"). We certainly require some—many really—shared conventions; and there are stages in the writing process, like editing and proofreading, when the conventional motive needs to be the primary concern of the writer. We would be doing students a disservice if we failed to teach such conventions; but we would also be doing them a disservice if we were party to their belief that the *main* criteria by which to assess writing as "good" and "clear" is following rules and imitating dominant models. We would also reduce ourselves to participating in a conception of language as a catalogue of rules to follow, with the teaching of writing therefore primarily a matter of dictating rules and policing texts for errors.

The Economic Motive

The second motive that I am teasing out is the *economic*, which is primarily concerned with the *efficiency* of written communication. This motive, of course, overlaps some with the conventional—but here we're less concerned with convention and more concerned with the cost-effective transmission of information through the medium of language. Being clear is being concise. A lack of clarity is a wordiness or haphazardness or use of the figurative that demands too much time and linguistic attention of the reader.

The economic motive of clarity comes to the fore with the emergence of a more scientific orientation. We can see its beginnings in Francis Bacon, who stands on the edge of an age turning to the scientific: "In a great work it is no less necessary that what is admitted should be written succinctly than that what is superfluous should be rejected; though no doubt this kind of chastity and brevity will give less pleasure both to the reader and the writer" (255, *Works, Vol 4*. London: Spedding, 1879). But the real turn to the

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economic motive, where clarity becomes equated with efficiency, comes with the 18th and 19th century rhetoricians—figures like John Locke, George Campbell, Hugh Blair and Herbert Spencer—who value perspicuity above all. Locke articulates the ends of language as "to make known one man's thoughts or ideas to another . . . to do it with as much ease and quickness as possible . . . and to convey the knowledge of things" (708, *The Rhetorical Tradition*. Bizzel, Patricia and Bruce Hertzberg, editors. Boston: Bedford, 1990).

The metaphor of the machine—language at its best as an efficient machine with little drag or friction—becomes the standard of clarity (not a surprising metaphor for a society in the throes of an industrial revolution). That metaphor, and the economic motive of clarity in general, finds explicit expression in Herbert Spencer's 1852 essay, "The Philosophy of Style":

> On seeking some clue to the law underlying these current maxims [of writing instruction, i.e., "Be clear"], we may see implied in many of them the importance of economizing the hearer's attention. To so present ideas that they may be apprehended with the least possible mental effort is the desideratum towards which most of the rules above quoted point . . . Regarding language as an apparatus of symbols conveying thought, we may say that, as in a mechanical apparatus, the more simple and the better arranged the parts, the greater will be the effect produced. In either case, whatever force is absorbed by the machine is deducted from the result. (3, *Literary Style and Music*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1951)

Spencer is the forerunner to those who equate clarity with "readability."

Today, such insistence on "economizing" of language in the name of clarity is most readily apparent in technical and business writing. But it is also embedded in our efforts at helping students to be more precise in their diction and less idiosyncratic in their organization of essays. For my students, about twice as many who attributed clarity to formal grammar and following rules stressed clarity as the need to economize their prose (i.e., "needs to be narrowed down"/"doesn't flow"/"too many words"/"sentence is rambling"/"must be more concise").

The danger in adopting the economic as the primary motive, when "Be clear" means "This prose demands too much of my attention; it's imprecise, ornate, expensive, wasteful," is that one can then be left with spartan writing that denies all self-referentiality, playfulness, metaphor, irony, voice—all in the name of conveying information.

The Rhetorical Motive

The third motive of clarity, the one I label the *rhetorical*, is the most nebulous but also most frequently our overriding concern when we talk about clarity in writing. The rhetorical motive affirms real and situated writers and readers (rather than assuming a discrete or independent text) and is concerned with their capacity to "see" one another, to create meaning together through the text. I originally termed it the connective motive because it focuses on understanding and inter-subjectivity—and what Kenneth Burke would call "identification" or "consubstantiality" between writer and audience. This is what we're usually shooting for in writing and the teaching of writing—clarity as a matter of what works to achieve the writer's purpose with a particular audience. There are also at work the other motives of clarity—shared conventions, and economy of language; but the primary concern is the reader and writer participating in the making of meaning . Here, "Be Clear" written by a teacher on a paper to a student is a kind of groping for meaning: "I don't understand. I don't see what you see. Show me. Let me into your country." A lack of clarity has more to do with a writer not meeting his or her purpose with an audience rather than with betrayal of conventions or indulgence in inefficient prose.

The primary assumption undergirding this species of "clarity" is a conception of language not as a set of formal rules of communication or as an efficient machine, but language as a social act, the involvement of readers and writers in written communication. This motive is also most true to the metaphor embedded in our use of the word clarity—text as a medium, a transparent window through which reader and writer recognize and understand one another (or conversely, an opaque medium which obscures mutual vision and understanding).

I'm not referring to some universal mode of language, for I think that the rhetorical sense of clarity is generally a local phenomenon, highly dependent on context. Such "clarity" can be achieved through any variety of means, be they quite conventional modes of exposition, or a wider playing field more receptive to irony, metaphor, humor, unconventional diction, usage, narrative, argument, genre—even extra-linguistic factors such as visual imagery, emotion, intuition. For a quick example I turn to Wayne Booth, who describes a kind of clarity realized through irony: "The very intricacy of our interpretive act builds for us, when we manage to do it right, a kind of rhetoric which no straightforward speech can ever duplicate, I think, a tighter bond with the author than any other kind of rhetoric can achieve except perhaps metaphoric" (2, Preface to *Rhetoric, Philosophy and Literature: An Exploration*. Burks, Don, editor. West Lafayette: Purdue U. Press, 1978).

I don't mean to imply that the rhetorical motive of clarity is built on some mystical association between reader and writer, for most often it is a very practical matter of the writer understanding his or her audience and context and making pragmatic rhetorical choices accordingly. But I do assert that the rhetorical motive welcomes all writing strategies that work in building bridges between writers and readers, and not just those grounded in convention or enacted for the purpose of transmitting of information.

Most student-writers (and most writers period) intuitively gravitate toward an understanding of clarity which is rhetorical in nature. My students, in response to an informal survey, attribute a lack of clarity in writing to rhetorical factors (such as "clear to me but not the reader," "difficult to interpret," "not enough detail," "not explained enough," "[the audience] doesn't understand what the writer is trying to say") about three times more often than to issues having to do with economizing their writing and about six times more than to following conventions and proper grammar.

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Again, all three (and maybe more) motives and goals of "clarity" are at play in any occasion of writing. When I ask students to give a definition of "clarity" as it applies to their own experience and writing, they generally touch on two or three "motives" or

justifications in responding. For example, in responding to my question of why a section of a paper might be marked "unclear" by a teacher, a student writes: "They are usually trying to say what I've written is a little hazy. Maybe my sentence keeps rambling on about nothing, or maybe I have not used proper grammar. Maybe my description of something isn't descriptive enough for people that have never heard of what I was taking about to understand." This student touches on all three motives of clarity, but remains uncertain about which is most pertinent. The student would be better served if the evaluator of her writing more specifically attributed the lack of clarity to one of the three possible sources she suggests: improper grammar (conventional motive), rambling (economic motive), or a lack of description (rhetorical motive). This would then point to what kind of instruction makes sense *for this student at this time*: (1) formal grammar instruction; (2) suggestions for a more accessible and efficient style; or (3) more attention to the rhetorical context and to the needs of her audience.

Maybe i've done some restating of the obvious here. Perhaps much of the time we intuitively know what mix of motives and goals are on the table when we use the term "clarity"—and our students might even share our understanding. But I've noticed clarity too often used in overly general and loaded ways. Better to break it down into three more manageable and precise motives and to adapt one's teaching to address each distinctively.

I've simply categorized the three main strains that see at work when people use the term clarity in reference to texts, in talk about teaching writing, and in assessment of student writing. I don't advocate abandoning the metaphor of clarity altogether, but I do suggest that it is helpful to situate a term we use so often and to discern among its motives in order to avert confusion and misunderstanding between teacher and student.

Tom Deans is a doctoral student in English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst where he also teaches in the Writing Program and coordinates the Math English Science and Technology Education Project, a university-secondary school-corporate partnership in the School of Education. He can be reached at Writing Program, 305A Bartlett Hall, UMass, Amherst, MA 01003 or tdeans@k12.oit.umass.edu.